

Testimony by

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Subcommittee on Civil Service and Agency Organization
Committee on Government Reform
U.S. House of Representatives**

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Madame Chairwoman and members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Claudia Cross. I am the Chief Human Capital Officer for the Department of Energy. I wish to speak to you today on the Department of Energy's, or as we say, DOE's need for improvement in the Federal hiring process, DOE's use of the newly granted hiring flexibilities, specifically category rating and direct hire authority, and DOE's efforts to streamline the hiring process to make the Federal government, especially DOE, the employer of choice.

THREE ISSUES RELATED TO HIRING FLEXIBILITIES

We understand and appreciate the Congress' interest in streamlining the hiring process. We, too, want the best and the brightest and we always seem to need them quickly. There are two points that we would like to emphasize regarding improvements in the hiring process:

The first point is that DOE would like to express its gratitude for the interest, concern and yes, zeal, of the Office of Personnel Management in its exploring various flexibilities that will assist agencies in their search for good talent. OPM's help has been discerning, responsive and, within the constraints of the sheer size of the Federal bureaucracy, quite timely. OPM has a tough job—meeting the needs of many disparate agencies with processes and initiatives that are flexible yet protect merit principles.

Our second point is that while DOE may not be in the “market” for all the flexibilities established and advocated by OPM, we recognize the potential for future benefit to our agency that the various flexibilities represent. The fact that the flexibilities are present and available will save the agency time and effort when the need arises.

Currently, DOE uses a number of flexibilities to streamline its hiring process. Recently, DOE used the Government-wide direct hire authority for Information Technology specialists to place IT employees within two weeks—this is remarkable in and of itself. Other similar authorities used routinely by DOE include the “career intern”

hiring authority, an excellent tool for DOE's use on college campuses, and the Presidential Management Fellows authority, another excellent tool for acquiring employees with academic backgrounds but little Federal experience. Finally, DOE, along with the National Nuclear Security Administration, also makes extensive use of their agency-specific excepted service appointing authorities provided under statutes authorizing the creation of DOE and the support of its scientific and technical employment needs.

As to the two hiring flexibilities referenced in your letter, Madam Chairwoman, DOE has not yet had occasion to avail itself of OPM's process for requesting agency-specific direct hire authority. However, we are exploring that option in our search for acquisition specialists, which are difficult to recruit in the Washington, D.C., area, engineers and scientists with nuclear backgrounds; which are needed by the Office of Nuclear Energy, Science and Technology; and specialists in nuclear engineering, nuclear safety and safeguards and security, which the National Nuclear Security Administration is finding to be in short supply throughout the country.

We have found that, initially at least, the category rating flexibility is less amenable to DOE's skills needs, which are concentrated in the scientific and technical series and for which there are rarely large numbers of applicants. Category rating, which is most efficient when a substantial number of applicants apply, may take time to become fully understood and utilized in our agency.

DOE'S EFFORTS TO STREAMLINE HIRING PROCEDURES

As you probably know, DOE is fully cooperating with OPM in the effort to shorten the time it takes to hire employees. We are currently working with our human resources directors in Headquarters and the field to measure the time that elapses between the end of the vacancy announcement period and formal job offers. Although the final statistics have yet to be compiled, preliminary indications are that most of that time is spent not in the "rating and ranking" process but in the interview process. The amount of time it takes to arrange interviews and reference checks alone can be daunting. If we could only streamline selecting officials' schedules, we'd be in much better shape.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I'd like to offer three observations on this agency's, and OPM's, efforts to streamline the hiring process. First, we are grateful that OPM is listening to us and to our needs. OPM's initiatives to speed hiring, to provide good quality candidates, to improve the Government's human capital performance management system, and to ensure managerial accountability convey a message to us and to our prospective employees that we want to be the employer of choice. That's powerful. Second, DOE is but one of many kinds of Federal agencies. No two are alike. We cannot expect every initiative to match our needs; nor can OPM expect us to adopt every initiative. Third, in pursuit of our four-pronged national security mission—maintenance of the nuclear

stockpile, energy research, energy conservation, and environmental management-- DOE will not sacrifice quality for speed. We want the best, even if it takes a bit more time.

Thank you again for allowing me this opportunity today and I will be happy to answer any questions that members of the Subcommittee may have.